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Internet resources for foreign correspondents

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Digital technologies mean that foreign correspondents have a new range of tools to help them do their job better. Some of the tools -- the satellite dish and the mobile telephone for example -- help journalists get their stories back to base more quickly. Others such as the Internet help reporters gather information more efficiently. This article lists Internet tools and sites that foreign correspondents can use.

Email should be a basic tool for all journalists, but it is especially useful for foreign correspondents because it provides access to contacts anywhere in the world. It also defeats telephone tag. Your message will be waiting in the person's electronic mail box when they log on. Some of the best electronic tools available to foreign correspondents are Profnet and ExpertNet.

Profnet <www.profnet.com> provides a direct link to more than 6,000 information officers at universities, corporations, think tanks, laboratories, medical centres, non-profits, and public relations agencies -- mostly in North America. PR Newswire <www.prnewswire.com> acquired ProfNet in 1998. Journalists should contact ProfNet to seek a list of experts to interview. The quickest way is to send an email to profnet@profnet.com with your request.

ExpertNet <www.cvcp.ac.uk/WhatWeDo/ExpertNet/expertnet.html> is the UK equivalent. It is run by the vice chancellors' committee, which represents all UK universities. Again, the easiest way to contact ExpertNet is via email -- at expert@cvcp.ac.uk. Responses usually arrive within 24 hours. Tell both groups if your need is urgent. It is also possible to “cloak” queries if your story is secret, or to restrict distribution to only part of the distribution network.

The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology in Sydney provides an excellent service for reporters in our region. The centre's home page links to Signposts <www.signposts.uts.edu.au>, a series of resources relevant to media practitioners who report on Asia and the Pacific. The database contains a contacts list from more than 30 countries in
the region, with hundreds of individual links. It also offers links to 35 countries, with relevant information about each such as the political structure, energy supply, population and media systems.

Signposts is a mini version of the mammoth service the CIA provides via its publications list <www.odci.gov/cia/publications/pubs.html>. Probably the best resource for foreign correspondents is the World Factbook. The most recent edition is usually a year behind the current year. The book's simple interface consists of the letters of the alphabet. Choose the letter that corresponds to the country you want information about. Every entry is formatted the same way, with a map and sub-sections covering geography, population data, government structure, the economy, transport systems, communications and defence forces.

For general information, Encyberpedia, the encyclopaedia of cyberspace <www.encyberpedia.com/ency.htm> contains one of the biggest and most comprehensive collections of online encyclopaedias I have yet encountered on the Web. Its home page offers links to almost 20 categories, listed alphabetically from atlas to weather. Each category links to hundreds of sites, also listed alphabetically. It is a truly formidable site.

The National Library of Australia maintains a comprehensive site that links to the electronic version of hundreds of Australian newspapers and magazines <www.nla.gov.au/oz/newspapers.html>. The library also offers listing for more than 1,000 Australian electronic journals, magazines, webzines and email fanzines <www.nla.gov.au/oz/auzeour.html>. The latter site contains an elegant navigation method: the individual letters of the alphabet and the numbers zero to nine. Click on the letter or number that corresponds to the first word of the title of the electronic journal, though you should exclude the definite and indefinite articles. Both sites will be a boon for journalists looking for specialist information. The library provides a 20-word summary for most of the publications.

One of the most impressive journalism resources in the United States is Facsnet, a collaboration between the Foundation for American Communications and the San Diego Supercomputer Project. The site, based in Los Angeles, is divided into four main areas: top issues, reporting tools, Internet resources and sources online. The first provides an Associated Press news digest of the "top" stories of the day. The digest, which appears Tuesday to Saturday Australian time (Monday to Friday US time), contains selected reports with Internet links that Facsnet considers journalists will find helpful in producing the day's news. Recent issues have included the Kosovo crisis, the Y2K bug and covering global weather change. You must register to use Facsnet. It is free and takes only a few seconds. You'll need a password.
The reporting tools section is a box of “analytical tools” designed to help journalists get clear answers to complex questions. It includes news backgrounders and reporting tips. The backgrounders cover issues such as numeracy skills for journalists while the tips section has a link to Nora Paul’s excellent online publication, *Computer-Assisted Research: A Guide to Tapping Online Information*. Also linked is a section of the book *The Online Journalist*, the first book written to help journalists use the Internet. Its author, Randy Reddick, is director of Facsnet.

Another excellent resource is NICAR, the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (<www.nicar.org>). NICAR is a partner with Investigative Reporters and Editors (<www.reporter.org>) and both are based at the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri at Columbia. NICAR and IRE have trained thousands of journalists to analyse electronic databases since 1989. The Canadian version of NICAR is based at Ryerson Polytechnic in Toronto. Dean Tudor, a professor of journalism at Ryerson, makes available a massive list of journalism resources, appropriately named Megasources (<www.acs.ryerson.ca/~journal/megasources.html>). It would be impossible to describe it adequately in a few sentences. Best thing to do is go there; it is awe-inspiring in its depth.

Finally, correspondents should point their Web browser to the Foreign Correspondents’ Club in Hong Kong. If you can’t visit it in the flesh, so to speak, you can get there virtually at <www.fcchk.org>. The site even lists jobs. Another excellent club to visit is the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan (<www.fccj.or.jp>.)

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